

A FIGHTING HERO OF THE INTELLIGENCE CORPS

By Harry Fecitt MBE TD

. . . however many of the latest spies' wonder-toys they had in their cupboards, however many magic codes they broke, and hot signals chatter they listened to, and brilliant deductions they pulled out of the aether regarding the enemy's organisational structures, or lack of them, and internecine fights they had, and however many tame journalists were vying to trade their questionable gems of knowledge for slanted tip-offs and something for the back pocket, in the end it was the spurned imam, the love-crossed secret courier, the venal Pakistani defence scientist, the middle-ranking Iranian military officer who's been passed over for promotion, the lonely sleeper who can sleep no longer, who between them provide the hard base of knowledge without which all the rest is fodder for the truth-benders, ideologues, and politopaths who run the earth.

John Le Carré's *A Most Wanted Man*

Introduction

I believe that these days most members of our Corps have a reasonably comfortable operational life – clean, dry clothes, regular ablutions and hot cooked meals, decent billets, indoor working conditions, immediate medical attention for headaches, and often the knowledge that other people are tasked with their physical security. That is the life of the mainstream Intelligencers.

But fortunately, since our Corps began there have been individuals, both men and women, who have deliberately rejected the mainstream and have embraced another life in the field. They sought out challenges that most others avoided – rough terrain and inclement weather, a cave or a bivouac for a billet, physical insecurity, the likelihood of torture before certain death, the company of strange, rough people whom they could not always understand or trust, night parachute insertions onto unknown ground, the loneliness of the self-imposed exile, hunger, thirst and exhaustion, the knowledge that taking a wound or suffering an illness in the prevailing circumstances could prove fatal – and these individuals thrived on those challenges until their mental resilience to do so had been eroded.

Many of these Intelligence Corps heroes chose to serve in the Special Operations Executive (SOE) during World War II and we have some insight into their operational lives by reading the citations that accompanied their gallantry awards. I will introduce you to some of these personalities, and I hope that you can share my admiration of their ability, fortitude, determination, endurance and raw courage.

No. 1 – PETER KEMP DSO

‘Hardship shall be your mistress, danger your constant companion.’ Advice proffered to trainees at Inverailort House

The citation for the admittance of Major Peter Mant MacIntyre Kemp, Intelligence Corps, to Companionship of the Distinguished Service Order reads:

Major KEMP was sent on a small clandestine operation to NORWAY in April 1940. The infiltration was to have taken place by submarine but on the outward journey the vessel was damaged by torpedoes from a U Boat and had to return to port and the operation was cancelled. In June, 1940 he was sent on an Intelligence mission to SPAIN and PORTUGAL from which he returned in September, 1940 having completed the work satisfactorily.

In February 1941 he volunteered for infiltration into SPAIN from GIBRALTAR for the purpose of harassing the expected German advance through SPAIN in order to attack GIBRALTAR. He returned to this country in August 1941 and stood by to be parachuted into Northern SPAIN until March, 1942.

From March, 1942 until May, 1943 he was attached to the Small Scale Raiding Force (No. 62 Commando). This Force had been formed to carry out small raids on German installations in NORMANDY, BRITTANY and the CHANNEL ISLANDS for the joint purpose of obtaining information and of undermining the morale of the German troops. Major KEMP took part in the raid on the CASQUETS when the entire garrison of the signal station was carried as prisoners. He also commanded the detachment in an attack on a strong point on the POINT de PLOUZEC (BRITTANY) when a number of Germans were killed without loss to the raiding party.

On 10th August, 1943 Major KEMP parachuted into ALBANIA as a member of an Allied Mission to the Partisan Forces. During this period he acted as Liaison Officer with the Partisan Provisional Government. He repeatedly exposed himself to great risk, notably on 21st August, when in conjunction with Albanian guerrillas, he attacked and shot up a large troop convoy in spite of heavy machine gun fire from the enemy. On 26th August he showed great gallantry throughout the day with the forward troops of the First Partisan Brigade, encouraging them to offer stubborn resistance to the advance of Italian troops which was supported by medium artillery, mortar fire and aircraft.

In September, 1943 at the time of the Italian collapse Major KEMP was instructed to provide a clear account of the political situation in TIRANA. In spite of the fact that this officer speaks no Albanian he entered TIRANA on 22nd September, 1943 in civilian clothes and spent four days in the town. On 25th September whilst making a reconnaissance of TIRANA airfield he was stopped by a German patrol and showed great resourcefulness in evading

arrest. He returned to his headquarters whence he transmitted most valuable intelligence by W/T to his Commanding Officer.

Throughout the winter of 1943/44 until his evacuation in March, 1944 Major KEMP continued to show great initiative and personal courage, and he took an active part in the fighting in the DEBRA area.

Civil War Spain

But the citation only illustrates part of what was an amazing life in the field. Peter was born in Bombay in 1915 where his father was a judge, and after education at Wellington and Trinity College, Cambridge, he, like many young Britons, went to fight in the Spanish Civil War. But unlike nearly every other young Briton in Spain he followed his right-wing beliefs and fought for Generalissimo Franco's Carlist Forces. He explained to a friend that he could not stand by whilst leftist mobs murdered people simply because they were priests or nuns or because they had a little money or property. He initially served in the ranks and then became a platoon commander in the Spanish Foreign Legion, until he was wounded by a grenade in the Battle of Caspe whilst fighting against the British Battalion of the Republican-sponsored International Brigade. This was followed on the first day of the Battle of the Ebro by a serious mortar wound that tore open his jaw; after hospitalisation he was allowed by the Generalissimo to recuperate on leave in England, and when he returned to Spain the Civil War was over, and the Carlists were governing the entire country.

After an interview with Franco, Peter obtained his discharge and later wrote:

For me those years in Spain (1936-39) were a rewarding experience, despite the horror and the heartbreak, and the wounds that trouble me still. I count it a privilege to have fought beside some of the best and bravest friends anyone could meet – and against some of the bravest enemies. . . . On my last visit to Spain in 1986, it was a joy to see, engraved on the new War Memorial at Caspe, scene of fierce fighting in 1938, the simple inscription: 'A Todos' – To you all.

The early war years – Spain, 62 Commando and Albania

Because of his wounds and his linguistic ability in Spanish, Peter started the war as a postal censor. When fit, he was posted to a Horses (Cavalry) Officer Cadet Training Unit where he was commissioned as a 2nd Lieutenant, and also learned equitation skills that were to be very useful in some of his future deployments. He joined the Intelligence Corps and

was employed in Military Intelligence (Research). After meeting one of the founders and later the Director of SOE, Lieutenant Colonel Colin Gubbins, a posting followed to the SOE's Inverailort House near Fort William where he trained and exchanged experiences with some of the future Special Forces leaders of World War II – Lord Lovat (Commandos), Mike Calvert (Chindits), and Bill and David Stirling (SAS). Peter's citation now offers the bare bones of his experiences until mid-1944.

Poland and imprisonment by the NKVD

The next deployment was a parachute insertion into Poland onto a dropping zone (DZ) near Czestochowa. When the Warsaw uprising against the occupying Germans began, SOE wished to drop a five-man team into Poland to discover what was happening. Joseph Stalin refused to agree, and for several months the British politician concerned (who later lost his nerve at Suez) forbade the drop. Then Gubbins got that decision reversed and the team went in.

Despite an awkward DZ knee injury (Peter had been concussed on his previous Albanian jump) and some disorientation, the team quickly met up with Poles from the Home Army and discovered that two other partisan armies were operating – a Russian-sponsored one and a far-right colonels' organisation, and both of those killed each other whenever they could. The Home Army was the largest and best organised. German Wehrmacht troops tended to spare the lives of Home Army prisoners that they took but the SS did not; both those sentiments were reciprocated.

The most dangerous enemy troops were renegade Russian General Vlasov's Army of Cossacks, Ukrainians, Turkomans, Mongols and other Asiatics who were recruited from German prisoner of war camps. Vlasov's men were feared because of the atrocities they committed throughout occupied Europe, and any captured were immediately shot along with the SS (Wehrmacht captives were deprived of their arms, equipment and uniforms and released).

After being attacked by tanks and infantry, the SOE team had to run for it, abandoning their heavy radio and battery charger, which cut them off from London. The Germans tracked the team until advancing Russians arrived. The team's relations with the Russian fighting troops were friendly and lubricated with much vodka, but then the NKVD (Russian state security apparatus) arrived and accused the Britons of being German agents. After two months of incarceration the team was released to the British Military Mission in Moscow and flown out via Baku, Tehran and Cairo. The men did not know it but they had been lucky, as SOE

counterparts dropped into Hungary were immediately liquidated by the Russians.

Thailand and Laos

After Poland, Peter could have sat the rest of the war out but in Cairo he had met an old SOE chum, David Smiley (a future commander of the Sultan of Oman's Armed Forces), who was heading out to Thailand where SOE was engaging the resident Japanese force, Thailand having been a Japanese ally since 1941. As might have been expected, Peter Kemp, whose marriage was just ending, followed in 1945.

Catching up with Smiley was not difficult because he had been in India recuperating from a bad accident in Siam, as Thailand was then called. Smiley had jumped into north-eastern Siam in May, but had then been badly burned by one of SOE's wonderful collection of gadgets: an exploding briefcase designed to quickly destroy sensitive documents. But Smiley's exploded without warning as he filled it with papers and five pounds of blazing thermite covered him. He suffered first, second and third degree burns and lay for a week in agony with a hole in his arm full of maggots; eventually the Siamese air force moved him to a strip where a Dakota from India could pick him up. SOE teams in the field did not have the luxury of doctors in attendance.

As part of a Force 136 (SOE's cover name in the Far East) operation, Peter Kemp was tasked to jump into north-eastern Siam at Sakon Nakorn, about 50 miles west of the Mekong River. His companion on the jump is worth a mention, as he, too, had suffered from the problem of the lack of swift medical attention that bedevilled many SOE operations. Rowland Winn had broken a leg on a jump into Albania, spending the next month in great pain in a shepherd's hut until a doctor could get to him; that experience had left him with a limp but a desire to continue his operational service with SOE. (Rowland later won a Military Cross in Korea at the Battle of the Imjin River.)

On the ground in Siam, the SOE team liaised with local officials, reconnoitred Japanese prisoner of war camps and fended off truculent US OSS officers, who were determined that Siam should not fall under British domination in the post-war world. After the war in the Far East officially ended, SOE teams arranged for the formal surrender of Japanese garrisons and for the release of Allied prisoners of war.

Peter and his team then moved across the Mekong into Laos, a French colony, where an amount of chaos prevailed as Viet Minh communist troops attempted to seize power. The US OSS again were obstructive as

they were determined that the French should not regain control of their former Indochinese colonies. Eventually Chinese Nationalist troops entered the country to maintain order until the French could reassert authority. Peter's tasks included rescuing French hostages from Viet Minh hands and preventing massacres of French civilians. Often, French paratroopers were dropped into the SOE base at Sakon Nakorn in Siam, along with whatever weapons that the British could find for them, the men then covertly crossed the Mekong to fight off Viet Minh attacks. In the end, the French regained possession of Indochina but only for a few years, and then ironically the USA took up the burden until it finally recognised failure.

Indonesia

In the new year of 1946, a peace treaty was signed between Thailand and Britain. New employment was found for Peter as the commander of a small mission to the Dutch East Indian islands of Bali and Lombok. There the Japanese garrisons had not yet surrendered, and Peter's team was tasked with discovering Japanese intentions. As the General despatching Peter said: 'In other words, if they cut your throats we'll know we'll have to launch a full-scale invasion.'

In the event, the Japanese surrendered immediately and the team spent four months on the islands conducting civil and military government affairs until Dutch troops arrived.

The post-war years

Peter was medically demobilised in June 1946 and remarried in November that year; this time it lasted twelve years. He suffered badly from tuberculosis until the British Army finally admitted responsibility and cured him in its Midhurst sanatorium. Then from 1951 to retirement in 1980 he worked for a Canadian life insurance company. The company was very liberal in allowing him time off to visit troubled parts of the world as a journalist. He was on the ground during the Hungarian uprising, the Congo troubles, Vietnam, and whenever there was excitement in Central and South America. It is hard to believe that Peter was not of use to other people in London during his overseas journalistic visits.

Peter Mant MacIntyre Kemp DSO, ex-Intelligence Corps, 62 Commando and SOE, died in London on 30 October 1993.

Books

Peter Kemp wrote four excellent books; in all of them his prose is succinct and clear and his narrative style is excellent and extremely readable.

Mine were of Trouble describes his Spanish Civil War years.

No Colours or Crest details the MI(R) and SOE years covered by his citation.

The Thorns of Memory is his autobiography in which he tells things as they were, freely admitting his own imperfections. This is the best book for reading a general overview of his life.

But I especially like *Alms for Oblivion* which details his time in Thailand, Siam, Bali and Lombok. Here, especially in Bali, we get a glimpse of the private Peter Kemp, who always had an eye for the ladies whilst the ladies always had both eyes for him. When he loved he did not love in a mean or a shallow way, but in the fulsome way in which he fought his military battles.

Peter Kemp was an idealist but a realist – he always believed deeply in what he did, whatever that was, and his prose is a wonderful antidote to the jaded, too-clever-by-half, cynical and sometimes plain unbelievable political and military utterings that fill our television screens today.

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Harry is former 22 Intelligence Company and various armies. Ed.

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